



SOFTWARE NEWS

■ AVID REACHES PINNACLE

Avid Technology has announced that it has completed its acquisition of Pinnacle Systems using a combination of share issues and \$71 million (around £42 million) in cash.

"The completion of this acquisition immediately strengthens Avid's ability to serve the industries that make, manage and move media," said David Krall, Avid's president and chief executive officer. The deal will bring all Pinnacle's broadcast products into Avid's Video division. However, Avid will continue to use the Pinnacle name for its new consumer division and retain many of Pinnacle's products.

■ CLOSE TO HOME

It's not run by the League of Gentlemen but The Best Of website at www.thebestof.co.uk is a local site for local people. Franchisees run local sites that cover their area, and each site has local information and news, plus a local business directory.



The idea is that when you want to find a plumber, for example, you're presented only with plumbers in your area. The directory is

financed through advertising at £10 a month and contains images, a written description and an optional audio message. The directory currently covers 64 areas, many of which have sparse directory listings, but this should improve in the next few months.

■ GOOGLE'S LIP SERVICE

Google has launched a free instant messaging (IM) client, Google Talk. The service is currently available only to people with a Gmail account. Like other IM clients, it allows you to communicate with others by text and voice. The client is based on the open-source Jabber project, and users can talk to people who use other clients, although no major clients (MSN, AOL or Yahoo!) are supported yet.

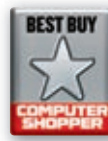
There doesn't seem to be much point in downloading the client at present, but those interested in trying it should visit Google at www.google.com/talk/index.html.



REVIEW MUSIC PRODUCTION SOFTWARE

ABLETON Live 5

RATING ★★★★★
PRICE £299 inc VAT
SUPPLIER www.dv247.com
DETAILS www.ableton.com

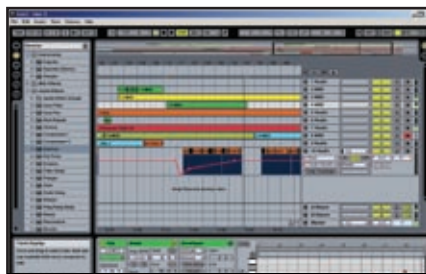


Ableton Live is an extraordinary piece of software. Most music production software has an interface that's modelled on the recording studio, but Live takes a fresh approach.

The program has a flair for live performance, which is something most music software overlooks. Two key features make Live perfect for the stage. One is its Session View, which presents samples, MIDI performances and audio recordings as a matrix of clips. These clips can be triggered in sync with a master clock, individually or in groups, using a mouse, QWERTY keyboard or MIDI controller. This enables the user to create and remix arrangements on the fly, making the software more an instrument than a recording platform. Its other performance-friendly asset is that it hardly ever stutters or falls over. You can add, delete and reroute mixer channels, change the tempo and even drag a playing sample from one channel to another, and playback continues without any glitches.

Many of Live's strengths are just as useful in the studio as on stage. Its aptitude for performance makes it ideal for quickly trying out alternative arrangements of tracks. The simple drag-and-drop interface means the software hardly ever stands in the way of the task in hand. Being able to reorder chains of effects by dragging them across each other speeds up the creative process compared to the rigid, finite effects slots of other packages.

Version 5 introduces many impressive new features. Live could already time-stretch samples so that they play in time with a track, but now entire songs are automatically tempo-mapped as you import them. This is great news for DJs who enjoy impromptu remixing. The automatic tempo



Arrange View takes a traditional, linear approach to track construction



New effects include notable absentees from version 4, such as a phaser, flangers and auto pan



Live's Session View organises music into clips for flexible composing and live performance

mapping is accurate, but not foolproof. We found that most tracks needed the odd tweak to stay in sync, but doing so is easy. Live can import MP3s, too, making it the ideal choice for creative DJs.

JUMP START

Another remix-friendly feature is the ability to jump to different points on the timeline in Arrange View or around individual samples (including MP3 tracks) without going out of sync with the master tempo. This gives samples and full arrangements some of the improvisational scope offered by the Session View. It also provides a quick and easy way to chop up samples and recombine them in interesting ways, where before you had to create individual clips for each fragment first.

In previous versions, adding an effect to a mixer channel made it play a few milliseconds late because of the extra computer processing required. Processor-intensive effects could cause appreciable delays, and even small delays were a problem with multi-mic recordings such as drums. Version 5 has plug-in delay compensation, which shifts the audio streams to counteract any delays. Timing is tighter overall, although high-latency plug-ins make the software a bit sluggish.

Clip Freeze allows you to bounce channels with power-hungry chains of plug-ins down to audio files to free up processing power. Cubase and others offer similar features, but this is more versatile. Rather than bouncing down the entire track, Clip Freeze bounces per clip, so you can still manipulate arrangements in Session View.

LIVING IN CLIP

Live has plenty more new features, such as a Live Clip file format that allows you to save clips along with their effects and any other settings. Five new effects include distortion and a MIDI arpeggiator, and welcome improvements have been made to the sampler instrument. Live is also faster to use thanks to new menus. Existing users will find the upgrade's cost of €119 (around £80) good value.

If you have yet to take the plunge, Ableton Live is recommended. Cubase is fine for recording pre-written music and Reason has some fantastic synths, but Live is perfect for composition with the PC. Onstage it's the only sensible choice.

Ben Pitt

✓ Flexible, inspiring composition and performance tools

✗ Not the best choice for straightforward recording tasks

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 600MHz processor, 512MB RAM. **Product code** 28683



REVIEW VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE

CYBERLINK

PowerDirector 4

RATING ★★

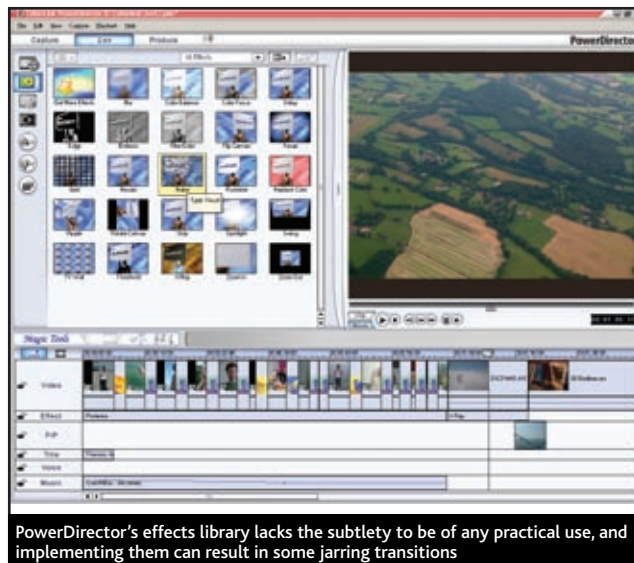
PRICE £57 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.softwarehouse.bizDETAILS www.gocyberlink.com

PowerDirector is video-editing software for people who want quick results and don't want to get bogged down with the intricacies of video production. It's operated mostly by drag and drop, and there's a noticeable lack of advanced tools that might confuse inexperienced users. DVD authoring is handled simply but effectively by the accompanying PowerProducer Express, which includes a handy utility for burning DV camera footage straight to DVD.

The screen layout has much in common with Pinnacle's Studio software. For example, you can zoom in on the timeline by dragging it with the mouse. On the whole, this is a good interface to imitate. PowerDirector 4's features resemble those of Pinnacle Studio as it was several versions ago. There's no chroma keying (for green-screen video overlay) or audio effects, and video effects settings are limited to a single slider.

Effects must be applied one at a time and, as they have their own track on the timeline rather than being attached to specific clips, you can't fade seamlessly from a clip with effects to one without. This means effects end abruptly, but as the effects themselves are tacky, their imprecision isn't a huge loss. Colour correction is linked to specific clips,



PowerDirector's effects library lacks the subtlety to be of any practical use, and implementing them can result in some jarring transitions

allowing for smooth transitions, and you can use other effects on top if required.

New to version 4 is Magic Tools, a set of four features that require minimal user involvement. Magic Clean is probably the most useful; its Clean Video option makes colours pleasingly warm. Clean Audio attempts to reduce audible noise, with varying degrees of success. Finding the best settings is tricky, as the controls don't allow you to preview easily and you have to use unintuitive controls to do so. Extreme settings occasionally make speech sound Davros-like, which can be fun.

Magic Motion pans across still images, adding class to slideshows, and detects faces into which you can zoom. Magic Cut automatically edits raw

footage to a specific length. You can choose to have more scenes with zoom and pan or more with people speaking, and can specify the typical length of clips. However, the results can feel random. Magic Sound completes the quartet, providing canned music that arranges itself to fit the length requested.

PowerDirector sacrifices versatility for ease of use, but it feels awkward nonetheless. The software insisted on previewing individual clips when we tried to view the whole movie. If our Windows taskbar was two rows high, the timeline scroll bar was hidden from view. Editing the audio track's volume was a nightmare and our PC crashed a few times during testing. Ultimately, there's no point in considering PowerDirector when Adobe Premiere Elements costs about the same and is more powerful, more stable and far easier to use.

Ben Pitt

✓ DVD authoring is straightforward and effective

✗ Underpowered; too many annoying gripes

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 450MHz Pentium II processor (2.2GHz Pentium 4 recommended), 128MB RAM (256MB recommended), 800MB disk space plus 15GB and DVD writer for DVD production.
Product code 300017549

HOTLIST OFFICE SUITE

ABILITY SOFTWARE

Ability Office 4

RATING ★★★★★

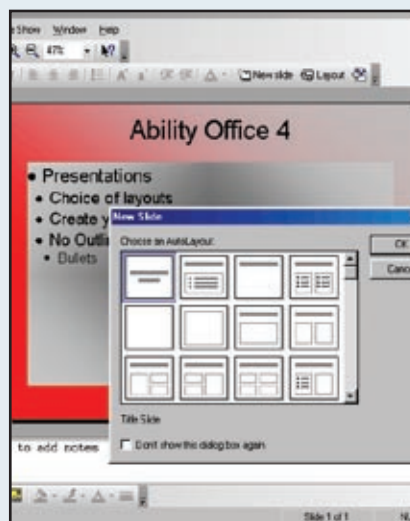
PRICE Professional Edition £50 inc VAT (upgrade £25); Standard/Small Business Edition £40 inc VAT (upgrade £20)

DETAILS www.ability.com

Buying an office suite doesn't necessarily mean spending a lot of money, as Ability shows us with its Office 4 suite. For just £50 for the Professional Edition, it undercuts the competition by a mile but still offers a functional package.

The latest version introduces the new Presentation program, which competes against Microsoft's PowerPoint. It's compatible with its competitor, bar a couple of features such as embedded video. This means that a few PowerPoint presentations won't open properly in Ability and you'll have to start your work from scratch. To facilitate this, Ability offers 20 slide layouts for slideshows.

The other big feature is Ability Mail. It's not included on the CD, but is available as a free download from the Ability website for registered users. It's the final piece in the puzzle for moving away from a Microsoft-based productivity suite.



Ability Office 4 also updates Ability Database. One of the strengths of the suite, the database now provides easier form design and reporting. Ability Write has the welcome additions of Autocorrect, Autotext and Grammar Checker. These features put the application on a par with Microsoft Word.

For the price it's very good value, although we recommend downloading the trial version to make sure all the features you need are present.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP, Pentium processor, 64MB RAM, 100MB disk space

HOTLIST VOICE-TO-TEXT SOFTWARE

SPINVOX

Voice Powered Text

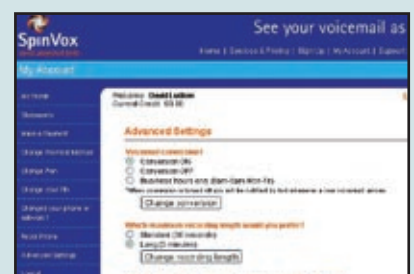


RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £5 per month for 20 messages
DETAILS www.spinvox.com

If you think that voicemail is an annoying way to receive messages, you'll love Spinvox's Voice Powered Text. This software converts all your voice messages to text files and sends them to you via SMS or email. The conversion is accurate and easy to follow. The basic £5 per month service should suit most people, but there are more expensive plans available for people who regularly receive more messages than this.

REQUIREMENTS Mobile phone and contract; internet connection to manage account online





REVIEW PHOTO-EDITING SOFTWARE

SERIF SOFTWARE
Serif PhotoPlus 10
Studio Pack

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £60 inc VAT

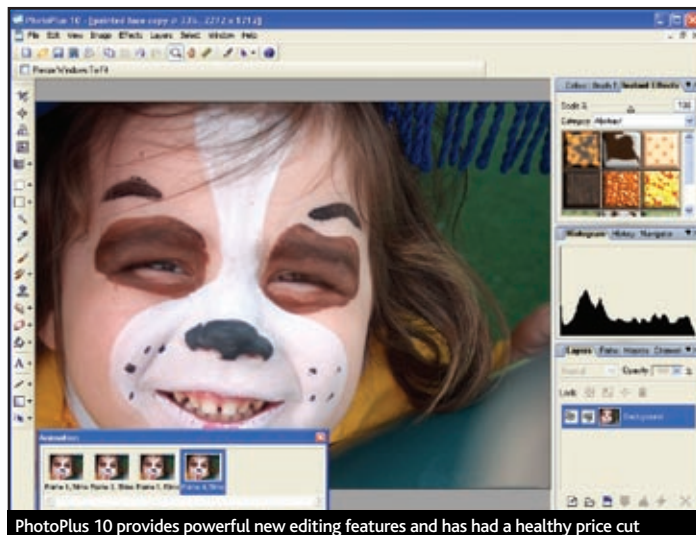
SUPPLIER Serif Software 0115 914 2000

DETAILS www.serif.com

Serif must be sick of reviewers constantly comparing PhotoPlus with Photoshop and its cheaper sibling, Photoshop Elements. The comparisons are inevitable, though, and PhotoPlus 10 has several new features that are similar to those of Photoshop's Album.

Just as Photoshop Elements 3 absorbed the separate Photoshop Album program to provide additional features for managing large collections of photos, the PhotoPlus Studio Pack now includes Serif's AlbumPlus to provide similar features. You can view your photo collections in various ways, sorting through them by month or year, or adding tags that sort pictures into categories such as family, friends and events. You can quickly combine a group of photos to create a slideshow.

PhotoPlus 10 has other similarities with Photoshop Elements. Its new Filter Gallery is just like the one found in Photoshop Elements, allowing you to add multiple filters and effects quickly to an image. The Filter Gallery interface isn't quite as straightforward, but it works well. The ability to hide and show any of your selected filters makes it easy to experiment with a variety of effects.



PhotoPlus 10 provides powerful new editing features and has had a healthy price cut

You can now import RAW photo files from digital cameras. PhotoPlus can also read the EXIF data stored in image files, which provides information such as the type of camera used, focal length and the date and time the picture was taken. A histogram displays information about the distribution of light and dark pixels in an image and an improved rotation tool can rotate an image in fractions of degrees. These are all useful features, but in every instance PhotoPlus seems to be trying to catch up with Photoshop Elements.

However, closer inspection reveals new features that outshine those of Photoshop Elements. PhotoPlus 10 includes some excellent simple options, such as cropping an image using the rule of thirds to compose a scene as effectively as

possible. PhotoPlus also offers more impressive features. The ability to adjust shadows, mid-tones and highlights automatically within an image is lacking in Photoshop Elements, as are the batch processing commands, which can be used here to rename multiple image files or convert them to different formats automatically.

PhotoPlus tackles other areas that Photoshop Elements ignores. It has options for creating animated graphics and using

tweening to generate animated sequences automatically. You can take existing photos and drawings and hit the 'convert to animation' command to use them in animations.

Finally, Serif has cut the price from £80 to just £60, making PhotoPlus Studio Pack 10 excellent value and a genuine rival for Photoshop Elements.

Cliff Joseph

✓ A versatile range of photo-editing tools at a competitive price

✗ Not as easy to use as Photoshop Elements

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 SE or later, 300MHz processor (500MHz recommended), 128MB RAM (256MB recommended), 130MB disk space

HOTLIST ANTI-VIRUS SOFTWARE

F-SECURE
Anti-Virus 2005

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £26 inc VAT

SUPPLIER F-Secure 01223 478800

DETAILS www.f-secure.com

One of the cheapest anti-virus products on the market, F-Secure's Anti-Virus is also one of the best. Its interface is clean and easy to use, and when we downloaded infected emails its pop-up listed the viruses but didn't halt the rest of the download.

With excellent detection across the board, it's great value for money and worthy of our Best Buy award.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, Pentium II processor, 128MB RAM, 30MB disk space



HOTLIST DTP SOFTWARE

SERIF
PagePlus 10

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £100 inc VAT; £50 upgrade

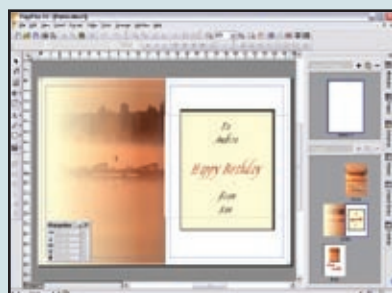
from any Serif product

SUPPLIER Serif 08003 767070

DETAILS www.serif.com

Serif's PagePlus 10 is aimed at the consumer who doesn't need the complexity of Adobe's InDesign. The latest version is even easier to use and allows anyone to create professional-looking publications. The price is similar to that of Microsoft's Publisher, but this product remains our favourite.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, Pentium processor, 256MB RAM, 300MB disk space. **Product code** B0002TS2Y



HOTLIST VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE

SONY
Vegas 6 +DVD

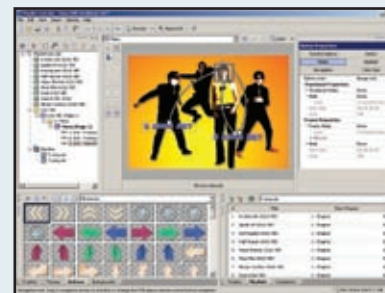
RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £440 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.sirentechology.co.ukDETAILS www.mediasoftware.sonypictures.com

Sony's Vegas 6 introduces a raft of new features. This professional editing platform includes comprehensive high-definition video (HDV) support. The program itself costs £300, but if you buy the production suite you'll get DVD Architect too. This software's lower price and excellent range of features give it the edge over Adobe Premiere.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 800MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 200MB disk space, DVD writer. **Product code** SON22359





REVIEW ONLINE BACKUP

GMRK SYSTEMS BackupMyStuff

RATING ★★

PRICE £10 per month for 2GB

SUPPLIER BackupMyStuff

DETAILS www.backupmystuff.com

Making regular backups of your system and data on your hard disk is very sensible, but what if the disk fails? You could write your data to multiple optical discs instead, but it's more hassle and they could still be damaged or lost in a fire. If you have a fast broadband connection, there is another way. The BackupMyStuff service provides 2GB of storage and the software to back up your PC over the internet.

While 2GB is more than enough space for documents, it's not enough to back up an entire PC, operating system and all. Those with large MP3 and photo collections will fill this space quickly. You can pay for more storage, but this soon gets expensive.

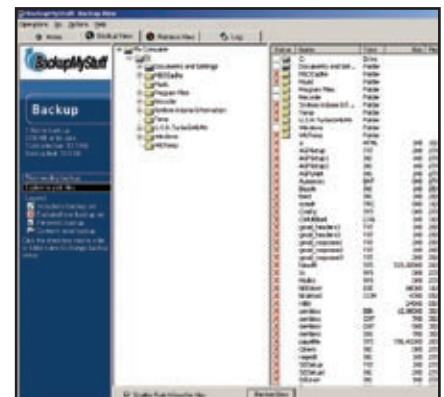
We had trouble getting the client software to work on either of the two PCs we tried – one at work and one at home. Both failed during the connection process, reporting that they couldn't detect an internet connection. We weren't given the option to retry or specify a proxy server and could only quit. To try again we had to start the application from scratch. We eventually traced the problem to our router's firewall configuration and set it to let BackupMyStuff through. We had to phone technical support to get the configuration information we needed, as the website and documentation don't provide it.



Backing up your important files online is fine in theory, but it can be very slow – even over broadband

Once we had configured our firewall, the software made a connection and the application started. This is easy to use. The Quick Start Wizard finds data files automatically, and uploading them takes just a couple of mouse clicks. When we tried this method, it generated a list of 1.3GB worth of files to upload. We used a 2Mbit/s broadband connection, which sounds as if it should make short work of this amount of data. Sadly, 2Mbit/s is the download speed. As we were uploading, we were limited to our broadband connection's slow 200Kbit/s. This took 14 hours and gobbled up a hefty chunk of our 2GB quota of available space.

A better option would be to save just My Documents and Outlook email, but this isn't easy. The Explorer-style view is difficult to use and doesn't list My Documents as a high-level folder. Instead, you have to browse your hard disk to find it. Even then, selecting a folder and choosing files is a drawn out process and not as simple as it is with



It can be hard to see which files are due for backup

other utilities such as Windows Backup. The view doesn't make it obvious which files are selected. Restoring files is much quicker: you can select an individual file (from one of up to seven versions) or restore everything. If your PC has died, though, there's not much you can do.

Online backup is a great idea that just doesn't work in the home environment. We recommend a combination of Acronis True Image (see page 225) and an external hard disk instead. This gives a complete backup and works out much cheaper.

David Ludlow

✓ Wizard backs your documents up straight away

✗ Slow to upload on most broadband connections; choosing files to back up can be difficult

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or later, Pentium processor, 68MB RAM, broadband connection

HOTLIST CREATIVE & DESIGN SOFTWARE

ADOBE Creative Suite 2

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Standard edition £786 inc VAT
(upgrade £375); Premium edition £1,040
inc VAT (upgrade £500)

SUPPLIER Adobe 0131 458 6842

DETAILS www.adobe.co.uk

Creative Suite 2 is a superb bundle of high-end products, including Photoshop, InDesign and Live Trace. Each product's features complement each other and they are all neatly tied together under a single interface. Each application also features a range of new tools such as Photoshop's Vanishing Point tool, which makes photo editing in perspective much easier. This suite is great value compared to the standalone prices.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000 or XP with QuickTime 6.5, 500MHz processor (1GHz recommended), 384MB RAM (1GB recommended), 2.5GB disk space



HOTLIST VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE

ADOBE Premiere Elements

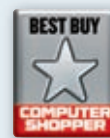
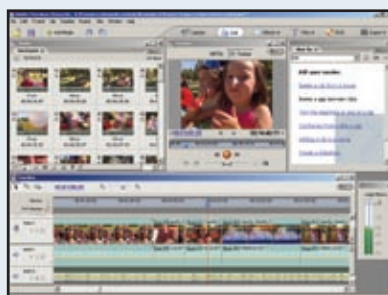
RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £53 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.savastore.comDETAILS www.adobe.co.uk

Premiere Elements is a cut-down version of the professional Premiere Pro video-editing application. It offers many of the same tools, and it's a powerful editing package. It is leagues ahead of other cheap editors and well worth buying if you have a DV camera and want to turn your footage into something special.

REQUIREMENTS Windows XP with SP1, 800MHz Pentium III or Athlon XP, 256MB RAM, 1.2GB disk space. **Product code** 25530008



HOTLIST HOSTING PACKAGE

1AND1 Microsoft Home

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £5.86 per month, £70 a year

DETAILS www.1and1.co.uk

If you want to run a website above and beyond the simple web space that you get with your ISP, you'll need a dedicated hosting package such as 1and1's Microsoft Home. You get 800MB of web space, 10GB of data transfers a month, a free .co.uk domain name and 300 email addresses. This web hosting pack, with its simple control panel and bundled scripts, is excellent value.

REQUIREMENTS Internet access, web browser



REVIEW WIRELESS NETWORK CONFIGURATION**BHV
Easy Wireless**

RATING ★★

PRICE £25 inc VAT

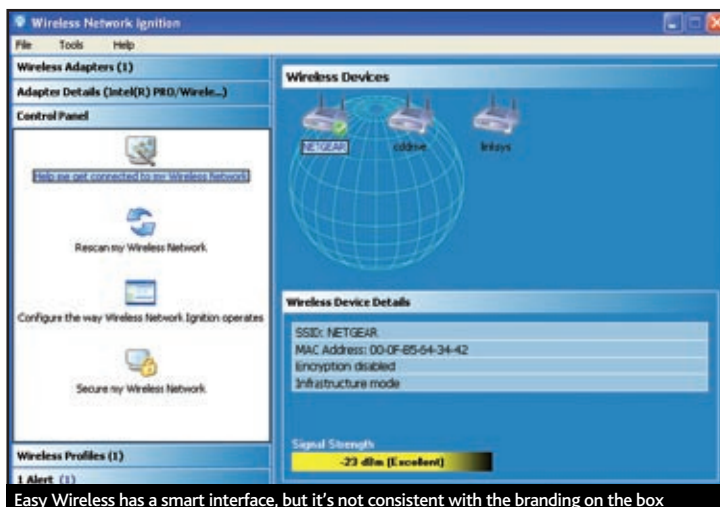
SUPPLIER BHV

DETAILS www.bhv-software.com

For some reason, Single Click Systems' Wireless Network Ignition has been rebranded Easy Wireless. It's a bit of a botch job, though, as the rebranding extends only as far as the box. The product installs as Ignition and directs users to Single Click's website.

The software is designed to make connecting to wireless networks simple. Once installed, it disables Windows XP's Wireless Zero Configuration service. Instead, you have to start the Easy Wireless software. This looks good and scans for wireless networks automatically. Clicking on a network displays its name and reveals whether security is turned on. Double-clicking a network is all it takes to get connected.

If security is turned on, a wizard helps you enter the security key. If you're using WPA-PSK, it's as simple as typing in the same password you used when you enabled security on your router. If you're using WEP, it's slightly different. You can type in the WEP key manually, but Easy Wireless tries to make the process as simple as possible by supporting automatically generated keys. Many routers generate a WEP key based on a password, and Easy Wireless supports the same facility. If you type in the password you used on the router, the software



Easy Wireless has a smart interface, but it's not consistent with the branding on the box

should generate the same WEP key. It's not guaranteed to work with all networks, though, so you may need to enter the key manually.

Once you're connected to the network, you have the option of saving a connection profile so that you don't have to re-enter the information next time you connect. While this works well and is easy to use, it does nothing that Windows' Wireless Zero Configuration service can't do. This utility, which is built into Windows, scans networks automatically, prompts for security keys and remembers settings, so you can reconnect to a network without having to enter all the information again. Even if you don't have Windows XP, the chances are your wireless adaptor comes with a similar utility. The client programs that Buffalo and USR provide are both easy to use.

suggested that we read the online support pages. However, these pages don't list the supported routers and don't refer to this feature. The paper manual and online help don't mention it either, so we had no chance of getting it working.

Easy Wireless's connection manager works well, but as Windows does the same job for free, it seems a pointless add-on.

David Ludlow

✓ Makes it easy to connect to a wireless network

✗ Windows does the job for free; poor documentation and online help

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 256MB RAM, 20MB hard disk space. **Product code** 3-8287-8630-8

HOTLIST REMOTE CONTROL SOFTWARE**3AM LABS
LogMeIn**

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Free; Professional edition

\$13 (around £7) per month

SUPPLIER www.3amlabs.comDETAILS www.logmein.com

If you have ever needed to access your PC while you've been away, LogMeIn is just the software for you. The free version gives you full remote control of your PC over the internet and works brilliantly.

The Professional version adds support for file transfers and guest invitations and lets you use email to send links to files on your PC. It's an excellent piece of software for anyone who does a lot of remote work.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, Internet Explorer, broadband internet connection

**HOTLIST WEB BROWSER****MOZILLA
Firefox 1.0**

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Free

SUPPLIER www.firefox.com

Firefox 1.0 is by far the best web browser we've ever used. Introducing advanced features such as tabbed browsing and support for RSS feeds, it is leaps and bounds ahead of Internet Explorer. When you also consider that it's better at rendering pages and is more secure, there's little excuse not to use it.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, 500MHz Pentium processor, 128MB RAM, 52MB disk space

**HOTLIST UTILITIES SUITE****SYMANTEC
SystemWorks 2005**

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £45 inc VAT

SUPPLIER Symantec 01628 592222

DETAILS www.symantec.co.uk

Keeping your PC running properly is a difficult task made a lot easier by SystemWorks. A One Button Checkup feature gives your PC a thorough examination and fixes any problems it comes across.

With Norton AntiVirus to protect your PC and GoBack 4.0 to make regular backups, PC woes can be fixed quickly and efficiently.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, 180MB disk space, IE 5.5 or above. **Product code** B0002TSZ2Y





REVIEW LOCATION TRACKING SERVICE

MTRACK SERVICES
KidsOK

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £40 inc VAT for three phones
and 10 location requests; 50p for each
additional request

SUPPLIER KidsOK 070 9204 4879

DETAILS www.kidsok.net

As long as your mobile phone is switched on, your network operator can track its location to within a few hundred metres. That's no good if you're a criminal on the run, but if you're a parent trying to locate your child it could be a life saver.

KidsOK is a new service that enables parents to do exactly this. The setup process involves registering the child's (target) and parent's (master) phone by text message, after which the parent can put in a location request.

The service is easy to use. Send the message 'ping <child>' from the master phone to 60777. Within 60 seconds you receive a text message that describes how many metres the child is from a known location, such as a tube station, and a link to a map that you can download on your phone.

This works extremely well and is very quick. However, the maps can be a little difficult to read and not all of them display road names, so it's not immediately obvious which area is being shown. A red circle appears on the map to show the area in which your child is located, and the size of this circle depends on where your child is. This is because the location service uses cell information from your mobile network. The country is split into lots of small network cells, each of which is served by a mobile mast. By recording the signal from your phone, your mobile operator knows which cell you are in. Cell areas range from 500 metres in cities to 7,500 metres in suburban areas. This affects the accuracy of the location search. Still, the combination of text information and a map should give you sufficient data to go on.

For the peace of mind of knowing where your children are when you need them, this service is well worth the money.

David Ludlow

✓ Locates your children quickly

✗ Map information isn't always detailed

REQUIREMENTS A mobile phone



Track your kids down from their mobile phone signal

REVIEW REGISTRY SOFTWARE

PC TOOLS
Registry Mechanic 2

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE \$30 (around £18)

DETAILS www.pctools.com

The Registry is where Windows and many applications store their configuration options. Having a single place to store such information makes application development easier, but it can also lead to problems. As you install and remove programs on your computer, the Registry entries can become corrupted or filled with invalid entries. PC Tools' Registry Mechanic aims to help.

The friendly user interface is reminiscent of anti-spyware tools. Just click the Scan button to get started. The program looks for invalid short cuts and shared DLLs and checks the Registry's integrity. The first scan took around five minutes on our test PC and discovered 93 invalid entries in our Registry, all of which we chose to delete.

Playing with the Registry can cause problems, but Registry Mechanic makes a backup before it attempts any repairs. You can easily restore a previous version using the Restore option. Registry Mechanic can also compress and reorganise your Registry so that it takes up less space and works more efficiently. Selecting this option also creates a Windows System Restore Point, so you can undo changes later.

However, this is separate from the backups Registry Mechanic makes, and to use Restore Points you have to open the Windows utility. We would have preferred Registry Mechanic to manage all backups and restores internally.

The price of the software includes a year's worth of free updates. A Live Update button checks for these updates, but we couldn't find any way of scheduling this automatically.

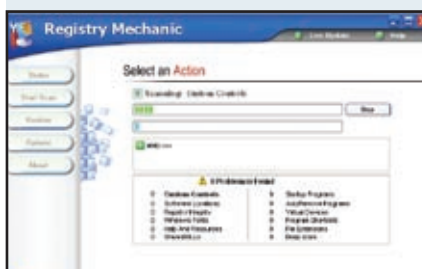
If you have a new, relatively clean PC, Registry Mechanic won't make any difference to its performance. If you've added and removed a lot of applications over the years, though, Registry Mechanic will prove a useful ally against the problem of an unstable PC.

David Ludlow

✓ Quick scanning; helps reduce system crashes caused by Registry errors

✗ Difficult to manage backups; no scheduled updates

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95 or later, 32MB RAM, 5MB disk space



Repairing the Registry can make your PC more stable

REVIEW SOFTWARE INSTRUMENT

STEINBERG
The Grand 2

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £170 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.arbitermt.co.ukDETAILS www.steinberg.de

Have you ever winced at the embarrassingly unrealistic sound of a synthesised piano? The piano is a complicated instrument that is extremely difficult to emulate. Physical modelling synthesis, which uses a mathematical model of an instrument's acoustic properties, doesn't come close. But Steinberg uses computer horsepower to tackle the problem.

The Grand 2 incorporates a massive 3.4GB of samples of two superbly recorded concert grand pianos. Each key has been recorded at various volumes without loops. Samples are streamed from the hard disk as they are needed, and the beginnings of samples are loaded into RAM to avoid latency. This requires a fast PC, though. We recommend at least a 2GHz processor to maintain the polyphony.

The software emulates other piano noises, too. As you release a key, you can hear the sound of the strings being damped by felt dampers, which is far more convincing than a simple fade-out. There's even a faint clunk of the hammer falling back into position. Depressing the damper pedal gives a tantalising swish of string resonance, after which playing a note makes the piano shimmer with sympathetic resonance. The soft pedal works beautifully and various brightness, velocity curves and reverb options are available.

The results are breathtakingly realistic, and given a decent MIDI keyboard it's as easy to get swept away as it is with a real piano. The software integrates easily with other music software, working as a VSTi, DXi or ReWire plug-in or as a standalone application. You'll need an ASIO sound card to avoid excessive latency, though. The software is copy-protected with a USB dongle, which is not supplied as standard, so unless you already own a Steinberg key from another Steinberg product, you should budget £20 for one. These costs can mount up, but The Grand 2 lives up to the highest expectations.

Ben Pitt

✓ Exceptionally realistic piano sound; a joy to play

✗ Power-hungry; copy protection could add to the expense

REQUIREMENTS Windows XP, 1GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 3.4GB disk space, low-latency sound card (ASIO recommended), Steinberg key, USB port



Tickle the ivories of your own virtual concert grand



REVIEW PDF SOFTWARE

SCANSOFT PDF Converter 3 Professional

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £65 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.softwarehouse.biz

DETAILS www.scansoft.co.uk

The Portable Document Format (PDF) is an excellent way of sharing files. A PDF file retains all the formatting in a document, table or spreadsheet, and anyone can view a PDF – you don't need a copy of the application in which it was created. PDF's rising popularity has led to an increase in the number of software packages that help you create PDFs from existing documents. One such program is ScanSoft's PDF Converter Professional 3.

This program uses three separate tools to convert, create and edit PDFs, although there is some crossover between them. Each has to be fired up individually, which can be irritating, but once running they are quick and easy to use.

PDF Create Assistant can create PDFs from single or multiple documents quickly and easily. We found that it works fast, and recreated a complex document accurately. The PDF Converter Assistant is equally easy to use. This uses a variety of techniques including optical character recognition (OCR) technology to turn PDFs into editable documents. We found it fairly accurate when we tried it on a document that contained text and graphics, but it required some tidying up afterwards, as is often the case with conversion tools. Complex documents that contain elements such as tables require more post-conversion tidying.

PDF Converter Professional is the main part of the application. This lets you create single or multiple PDFs, add security features such as passwords and encryption, include watermarks and stamps and control compression and font embedding.

At half the price of Adobe Acrobat, this is a fine choice for people who work with PDFs. However, better integration would improve the applications.

Sam Ellis

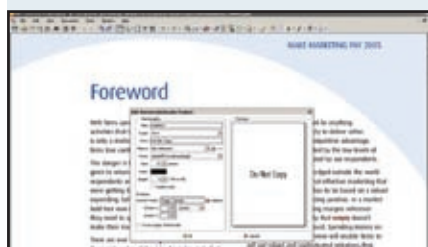


Low price; easy to use



Converter Assistant could be more accurate

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or later, Pentium processor, 128MB RAM, 140MB disk space, IE5.1 or later, internet connection



You can use ScanSoft PDF Converter Professional to add features such as watermarks to your PDFs

REVIEW VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE

MAGIX Movies on CD & DVD 4

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £30 inc VAT

SUPPLIER FastTrak Software Publishing

01923 495496

DETAILS www.fasttrak.co.uk

Magix's Movies on CD & DVD 4 is aimed at novices who want to edit home movies and burn them to disc. It's similar to CyberLink's PowerDirector (reviewed on page 53) but is half the price.

As you would expect from a product aimed at beginners, the interface is clear and straightforward. A simple timeline running across the bottom of the page houses your video clips. You can import video footage directly from your hard disk or record it from another source such as a DV camera, analogue video capture card or TV tuner. It's easy to use, although the file import option could do with a preview option so that you don't have to rely on filenames.

The software provides a range of effects that you can apply to each clip, including mirroring along the vertical axis and flipping the image. None of the effects is processor intensive, so you can apply them in real time and turn them off with the click of a button.

The editing tools are rather basic: you can pause a video clip part way through and choose to delete the beginning or end, or split the clip in two, but that's all. There's a new Story Maker mode, though, which contains thumbnail previews of effects and video enhancements, including video softening and automatic of brightness and contrast adjustment. These are easy to use, but a drag-and-drop method would make them easier to apply and make it more obvious which effects have been applied to a clip.

Magix provides online help, which is fine except that many of the screenshots and some text is in German. Some of the items in English have been translated incorrectly, too, which makes it even harder to follow.

For basic video editing, Movies on CD & DVD 4 is easy to use, but we recommend you spend a bit more on Adobe's Premiere Elements.

Sam Ellis



Low price; simple interface



Requires powerful hardware for best results; slow to install

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or later, 400MHz Pentium II processor, 64MB RAM, 300MB hard disk space, graphics card, TV tuner card (for extra features)



A new Story Maker feature helps you make your films more entertaining

REVIEW PHOTO-EDITING SOFTWARE

MAGIX Home Photo Wizard

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £27 inc VAT

SUPPLIER FastTrak 01923 495496

DETAILS www.fasttrak.co.uk

It's hard to believe that there could be anyone out there who doesn't have some kind of photo-editing program installed on their computer. Yet there's no end to the stream of new photo-editing packages trying to muscle in on this highly competitive market. The Home Photo Wizard from Magix stands out from the crowd, though, because it is so inexpensive. At just £27 it's half the price of its main rivals, including Adobe's Photoshop Elements and Serif's PhotoPlus (reviewed on page 54).

The package has three components. The Home Photo Wizard is a file management program that helps you organise your digital photo collection. Its options include the ability to categorise and search for photos and to burn photo albums to CD or DVD. Photo Clinic is an image-editing program with a commendable array of tools for tidying up your photos, along with a decent selection of artistic effects and special effects filters. Finally, there's the Music Manager program, a passable music player that seems to have been thrown in for good measure.

The Photo Wizard and Photo Clinic programs work well and include a decent range of features for the money. However, both suffer from ungainly interfaces. Photo Clinic in particular has a habit of throwing confusing dialog boxes on to the screen without explaining how they work. Jargon such as 'orbitals' and 'radius variance' won't mean much to beginners, and the skimpy printed manual does little to introduce new users to the techniques of photo editing.

Although the Home Photo Wizard is undoubtedly good value at £27 including VAT, its inelegant interface and poor documentation mean it's unlikely to offer much of a challenge to its well-established competitors.

Cliff Joseph

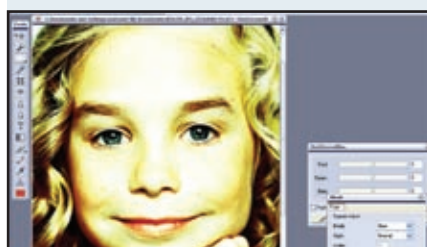


Low price; good selection of special effects filters



Cumbersome interface; poor documentation so not ideal for beginners

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or later, 266MHz processor (500MHz processor recommended), 64MB RAM (128MB RAM recommended), 250MB disk space



Home Photo Wizard provides a decent range of special effects filters for less than £30